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What It Takes for Universities to Conduct Useful Education Research

Many institutions lack the resources to make research-school partnerships successful

By Thomas S. Dee — January 18, 2022 ⌚ 3 min read



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In my experience as a policy-oriented academic researcher, successful researcher-practitioner partnerships rely critically on two sets of factors. The first involves the thoughtfulness, initiative, and courage of the practitioners themselves. I have been fortunate to collaborate with inspiring educators who embraced the design and implementation of deeply controversial innovations as varied as [ethnic studies in San Francisco](#), [high-stakes teacher evaluation in the District of Columbia](#), and [targeted supports for Black boys in Oakland, Calif.](#) But, more than that, they are also willing to allow independent researchers like my collaborators and me at Stanford University to access their data and study the impact of their innovations, knowing full well that the results may not produce politically convenient answers. Those vital acts of trust and courage require district leaders who have a sharp mission focus and a mindset of continuous improvement that sees beyond the short-term political risks of engaging with independent researchers.

The second critical set of factors involves the supports and incentives that encourage academic researchers to engage in partnerships with practitioners. While many academics value supporting practitioners in their day-to-day activities, their core focus and professional success often turn on publishing rigorous and creative research that advances our shared understanding of the world. Partnership research can advance those ends, but, in truth, partnership and publishing are often in stark conflict. For example, effective partnership research typically requires much greater investments of time and energy (such as creating and nurturing mutualistic relationships, building systems for securely accessing data) than, say, projects that rely instead on readily available secondary data.



The education leaders know full well that research results may not produce politically convenient answers.

Partnership research can also be exceptionally risky. Researchers know that frequent changes in district leadership and priorities can unexpectedly imperil their investments. These costs are particularly prohibitive for early-career researchers, who face short, high-stakes evaluation windows for establishing their scholarly productivity and impact.

I have found that focused investments attenuate these risks and can powerfully catalyze

researchers' deep and sustained engagement with practitioners. The intersecting partnership initiatives at the Stanford Graduate School of Education (the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, the Stanford/SFUSD Partnership, and the Stanford-Sequoia K-12 Research Collaborative) provide a compelling example. Their expert staff cultivate relationships and knowledge-sharing that guide the selection of partnership research that matters to both researchers and practitioners as well as the ultimate use of that research. These initiatives also provide a variety of valued practical supports such as secure data access and management.

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January 18, 2022

But, make no mistake, institutions like Stanford are in a uniquely privileged position to realize this vision. While there have been several notable philanthropic, public, and institutional investments in researcher-practitioner partnerships or RPPs, such resources are still quite limited and unevenly available in the nation's highly stratified system of higher education. That means we are still forgoing opportunities to connect our nation's powerful research capacity to the considerable set of challenges schools face. This underinvestment both impoverishes the intellectual insights our researchers produce and limits the high-impact, practical guidance it can provide to education leaders.

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